W.E. Hummel was 20th Century Fairbury Photographer

By: Male C. Maley
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The story of Fairbury photographer W.E. Hummel began with the birth of his father, William Hummel, in 1836 in Chester County, Pennsylvania. He married Mary Sabold of Linfield, Pennsylvania, on May 10, 1862. William Hummel was a veteran of the Civil War. He served with Company G of the 175th Regiment of Pennsylvania Volunteers at West Chester. He served under General Foster and participated in campaigns along the South Atlantic Coast towards Savannah. At one time, he was employed as a lock tender during the Schuylkill Canal's heyday. William died in 1911 in Pottstown, Pennsylvania.

William and Mary Hummel had two children. Daughter Catherine Gertrude Hummel (1866-1939) married George O. Stott. Catherine and George lived their whole lives in Pennsylvania.

The other child of William and Mary Hummel was William E. Hummel. He was born in 1862 in Pennsylvania. At a very early age, W.E. Hummel became interested in the field of photography. He became a self-taught photographer and opened a gallery in Skaneateles, New York.

While working in Skaneateles, W.E. Hummel met a young lady named Miss Cora Blanche Leahy of Syracuse. They were married in October of 1906. Mr. Hummel was 44 years old when he married 25-year-old Cora Leahy. While they were living in Pennsylvania, they had two sons, William Jr. and Walter Hummel.

In 1910, W.E. Hummel moved his family to Fairbury, Illinois. He took a job in the Chase Studio at Fairbury. In April of 1913, he purchased the business located on the second story of the Walton building. After they moved to Fairbury, William and Cora's third son, Jack Hummel, was born in Fairbury in 1913.

In the 1910s, Fairbury was often called the motorcycle capital of the world. Brothers Frank and William Goudy started racing motorcycles on local tracks. They quickly began racing on tracks all over the United States. They won many races and held world speed records. Both Frank and William Goudy were inducted into the AMA Motorcycle Hall of Fame in 1998.

Carl Goudy reached his peak in late 1915 when he won the prestigious Chicago motorcycle race. After the Chicago race was over, Carl loaned his high-speed motorcycle to his brother William Goudy.

In January of 1916, William Goudy took the fast bike to a California race track. William and another professional racer started doing practice laps on the trail. A third professional driver entered the track and passed the other two drivers. After he passed William and the

other driver, he accidentally dumped his motorcycle on the track. To avoid hitting the downed bike and driver, William swerved in one direction, and the other driver swerved in the other direction. Unfortunately, both William and the other driver were instantly killed when they struck objects on the border of the track. Carl Goudy buried his brother William Goudy in a nearby California Cemetery.

In that era, Fairbury had a motorcycle club with a large number of riders in the club. W.E. Hummel took several iconic photographs in the 1910s showing these early motorcycles in the downtown area of Fairbury. Several of these historic photographs still survive today.

In 1917, the hot topic among American photographers was how to get beautiful sepia-like tones in developing photographs. W.E. Hummel wrote a letter to the editor of the Bulletin of Photography and included an example of his photographic print. Mr. Hummel said that Fairbury got its city water from artesian wells 2,000 feet deep. Because this water had a trace of sulfur, when the water was used to help produce photographs, it gave the desired sepia tone. Mr. Hummel further recounted that he missed the distinctive taste of Fairbury water when he traveled away from Fairbury.

In the 1920 U.S. Census, W.E. Hummel and his family lived in a 206 West Walnut Street house.

On March 28, 1923, the entire Walton's store was destroyed by a massive blaze. Following the fire, W.E. Hummel set up his place of business in the Keck building, west of Walton's department store. Eventually, his son William Hummel Jr. joined him in the photography business.

When the department store of the Walton Bros. burned for the third time in 1923, the whole town of Fairbury was afraid they would not rebuild a third time. Fortunately for Fairbury, John W. Walton and his son were able to finance the building of the most magnificent store in Central Illinois at that time. For that era, it was a massive project to build a large new two-story building. W.E. Hummel captured a few photographs of the new building in 1923. Copies of a few of these rare photographs still exist today.

In the 1930 U.S. Census, William and Cora Hummel lived in a house at 200 West Walnut Street in Fairbury. All three sons were still living at home when this census was taken. Cora Hummel died in 1935 in Fairbury at the age of 53. W.E. Hummel passed away in 1938 in Fairbury at the age of 76. Both William and Cora are buried in Fairbury's Graceland Cemetery.

W.E. Hummel was a photographer for 28 years between 1910 and 1938. Many of his photographs are now over 100 years old, but they are in perfect condition. Some of his most iconic photos that still survive include Fairbury motorcycle scenes and the construction of the Walton Department Store in 1923.

The Fairbury Echoes Museum has a new display with information about many early photographers, including W.E. Hummel. Admission to the museum is free, and the new collection is a fascinating review of Fairbury's photographic history.

Hummel Photograph of Walton's Being Rebuilt in 1923 after the Third Fire